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METHOD AND STYLE IN RESTORATION

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METHOD AND STYLE IN RESTORATION

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THE COOPER UNION MUSEUM
FOR THE ARTS OF DECORATION

Acknowledgment

In assembling materials and soliciting advice in connection with the exhibition, the Museum is once again made aware of the unfailing generosity of its friends in providing not only objects needed to present an exhibition in its fullest scope, but also in offering unstinting quantities of that even more precious commodity, time. To all its friends, and particularly to those who are a part of the present exhibition, the Museum extends its grateful thanks.

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Organized in honor of the annual meeting in New York of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Museum's exhibition is presented concurrently with an exhibition, "Preservation: the Heritage of Progress," especially prepared by the National Trust and which, following this initial showing, will be circulated as a traveling exhibition by the American Federation of Arts.

The Museum has gathered a small but representative group of objects associated with a number of individual sites included in the National Trust exhibition, to accompany its showing at the Museum, and the following lenders of these are given special thanks for their generous assistance.

Casey Jones Railroad Museum, Jackson, Tennessee

Castillo de San Marcos National Monument, St. Augustine, Florida

Jackson County Historical Society, Independence, Missouri

Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

The James Monroe Memorial Foundation, Fredericksburg, Virginia

The Nation Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of Colorado

Lenders to the Exhibition

American Institute of Interior Designers, National Committee on Historic Preservation

American Jewish Historical Society, New York, N. Y.

Anonymous

Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, N. Y.

Colonial Williamsburg, Williamsburg, Virginia

Elinor Merrell, New York, N. Y.

Ginsburg & Levy Inc., New York, N. Y.

Museum of the City of New York, New York, N. Y.

New-York Historical Society, New York, N. Y.

New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown, N. Y.

Mrs. Samuel Schwartz, Paterson, New Jersey

Sleepy Hollow Restorations, Tarrytown, N. Y.

Staten Island Historical Society Museum, Richmondtown, Staten Island, N. Y.

State of Illinois, Department of Conservation, Springfield, Illinois

The Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, Boston, Massachusetts

Touro Synagogue, Newport, Rhode Island

To Make the Restoration Live

The desire to re-create the atmosphere of a worthy site from the past is a commendable one, for it springs from a wish to conserve and record our nation's history and national style for future generations. America's heritage is one for pride, as it stands unique in time not only historically, but also as a contribution to the world's social development and, most important from the present point of view, for its evolution of a recognizable national style. Each restoration provides an opportunity to conserve some aspects of this heritage and to comment on personages and attitudes of our collective past, no matter how recent. A survey of existing restorations of sites from the earliest colonial era to the recent past will show an observer that even the most literally transplanted ways of life were, through adaptation to a young culture and through the diversity of cultural influences here, subtly altered into an American way.

The concept of America as the world's melting pot, a term happily coined by Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, ordinarily comes to mind in relation to the enormous population expansion of the 19th Century. But it remains perennially the most concise descriptive term, for from earliest colonization of that land which is now the Eastern seaboard of the United States, a mixture of nationalities was accepted and, except in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, frequently encouraged. As important centers of commerce, Philadelphia and Newport provided the chance for a quick success to industri-

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In the following pages, objects included in the exhibition are referred to by the symbol □.

ous immigrants, whether English, Dutch, French, German, Scotch from Scotland or by way of Ulster, Irish, Swedish, Finnish, Swiss or Jews from Portugal. The Dutch settlers of New York were tolerant of a diversity of national influences, and the social centers of the South with an economy of agriculture and trade, were no less receptive.

The Colonies early set themselves apart from some aspects of European societies. It was no less usual in the later 17th century or early 18th century for an immigrant to rise in a decade or two from a simple and often illiterate craftsman to a position of wealth and prestige than in the mid- and late 19th century. Indeed, with less competition in the earlier times, such was the rule rather than the exception.

Commerce acted as a leveller of American society. It fostered the notion of "every man as good as the next man" regardless of his birth, and his success or failure depended on his place in this commercial society. With an equitable balance of agriculture and trade America avoided a peasantry such as Europe had always accepted as inevitable. The crop planter in the South and the produce farmer in Pennsylvania or Connecticut alike farmed for a profitable market, and the world's goods were available to him in return. America's ships sailed the world over, and necessities as well as exotica were welcomed from whatever country of origin.

From earliest times an American style was established. No transposition of a culture, such as that in the Spanish colonies to the South, was possible in the English and Dutch colonies.

American craftsmen early provided furnishings made in the image of remembered ones in Europe, though often with a difference. There can be no doubt that the publication of

design books of the 18th century and the many "how to" books of the 19th century was given spur by the demand in this country. Books of designs by the famous furniture-makers, Chippendale,[□] Sheraton and Hepplewhite, found their way to the new world, and were accompanied by a wide assortment of anonymous books, such as the *Chimney-Piece-Maker's Daily Assistant, or, a Treasury of New Designs for Chimney-Pieces*,[□] published in London in 1766, which certainly guided the local American craftsman. The 19th century saw a fuller flowering of architectural and design compendia, witnessed in the many works of A. J. Downing[□] during the 1840's and Samuel Sloan[□] during the 1850's and 1860's, dealing with the construction of cottages and villas, and for interiors in Eastlake's *Hints on Household Taste*[□] and in the many magazines such as *Godey's Lady's Book*.[□] Such books, particularly those dealing with cabinet work and architecture, were widely used by skilled craftsmen, some of whom imparted a daring individuality to their works, often with consciously artful results.

The craftsmanship of these men frequently has the quality of the essence of the craft, which may have initially risen from a conscious lack of pretension in adapting European styles but which was translated into an American style that suited a society concerned chiefly with an object's ability to meet the comparatively rigid requirements of daily function. It is thought by some that the chair of the style popularly called "Queen Anne" as developed in the colonies in the 18th century has of all chairs in time the ultimate in "*chair-ness*."[□]

Side by side with the waxing of craftsmen in the colonies the importation of the goods of the world went on unabated, and there appears to have been no serious competition. Europe and Asia were still the principal sources for ceramics.

Woven textiles of quality came from Europe, although simple stuffs were woven at home. However, the cry of the high cost of labor in this country is not new, and the technically more complicated and burdensome crafts were left for the cheaper labor of Europe and the Orient to provide.

A desire for the goods of a world market surely did not originate with our American ancestors. Societies from earliest times have placed much store by exotic merchandise. The American style is set apart by its alliance of furnishings fine in quality, whether imported or of domestic manufacture, with a straightforward acceptance of the strictures of a life lacking conveniences. Every outpost had houses of elegance, yet all but a very few made a virtue of the practical and the necessary.

This factor is of significant importance to those who undertake the treacherous task of preservation and restoration, for it persists in our culture even to the present. The ostentatious is still suspect, but can be accepted no matter how outrageous if tempered with a practical rationalization.

There is danger in romanticizing. Our ancestors who peopled these sites were extraordinary men in that they were colonizers and immigrants. Certainly James Oglethorpe or William Penn were considered eccentric among contemporaries of their social class. Comparable personalities from the 19th century at the height of its production excesses, men who had the courage of their convictions in building and furnishing their homes and public places, are paid a meagre tribute if their houses reflect no more to us than that they were paragons of good taste. "Sunnyside," Washington Irving's house on the Hudson, reveals in the quality of its atmosphere the shaping of Irving himself, a sensitive man with all the romantic virtues of his day; all factors, and

information about these component elements are available to its restorers through a number of documentary sources.

To make the restoration live: this is the problem — a problem most closely allied to that of the designer of settings for a motion picture. The stage designer is farther removed. His setting comes alive with the actor, and he plans it most successfully when he removes all properties and furnishings except those necessary for action or for visual emphasis.

The motion picture set designer, however, is frequently called upon to propel the action. Frequently much of a story is told by a vista, the crossing of a threshold, the survey of a room, the camera focused on a still life of furniture, or even an object. The appointments of such vignettes, whether historical or evocative, from past times or the present, must be convincing if the film has any pretensions at all, and the amount of research involved is prodigious.

These research sources and techniques might well be a help in the work of restoration, for a similarity of purpose is apparent. But eventually the designer for film has an actor as an ally which the restorer of an historic site does not. Whatever the purpose, the task of undertaking to restore a building of historic or esthetic importance is a formidable one, full of many pitfalls, and important decisions are necessary at the very outset.

It would be a relatively simple matter to consider only the architectural aspects, and restore the exterior, for documentation of so important a work as a building is usually readily available. In addition, a building as such avoids the necessity to associate it with human habitation since it provides enough interest to a visitor through the statement and interplay of its form and mass. But this is also true of a monument. The desire to provide the drama of discovery impels those who

recreate houses of the past to restore the interiors in as much detail as information permits or as uninformed fancy dictates.

The purpose of the restoration must be fully apprehended, for any one site can provide many facets of interest; it can, as example, at the same time be of historic and esthetic worth and express characteristics of social position, geographical locality and era. Whatever the category, however, it is desirable that its public be exposed to the evocation of another time, and personalities and methods will vary as much as places.

For each project by its nature is unique. It is through its individuality that each restoration gives the best clues to its nature. Research must obviously begin with the site. Vestiges of what once existed are left, and a good researcher is required to know where to look, how to authenticate what is found and when to believe the evidence of his own eyes. Such relatively minor-seeming exercises as determining types of nails□ employed or the distinctions between "Dutch" and "Colonial" bricks□ can, as was achieved, for example, with judicious care at Richmondtown on Staten Island, eliminate basic errors at the start of restoration projects. Furnishings in the building can frequently be documented through wills and inventories as well as family records and papers of all kinds that are part of every household and that often give evidence in plenty. Then the interior itself provides telltale vestiges of early condition. Fragments of wallpaper and paint□ sometimes are found imbedded in cracks around or under moldings. Marks of incomplete removal of earlier arrangements leave their useful evidence.□ If a radical restoration is intended, and the additions of later times are to be erased, stripping of the house to timber or brickwork in places may be necessary to find clues.

Excavation by trained archaeologists has become a frequent practice, particularly for the authentication of a large site or complex of buildings. Much of interest can be learned through this method about both the interiors and the environment, for if an old trash heap is found it provides a wealth of information about objects used in the household — shards of plates and kitchen wares, cast-off bottles and jars, nails and hardwares, toys, lamps, buckles and tools, many of which can be identified by comparison with known objects.□ This is perhaps the first and most fundamental use restoration projects make of museums, where the least fallible answers to questions of date and provenance may be obtained. It is revealing to know that British soldiers stationed in barracks at the south end of Manhattan during the Revolutionary War used salt glazed table wares□ of the same stylish pattern as that used by a prosperous and notable family in Tarrytown,□ as may be seen among the many shards excavated during the restoration at Van Cortlandt Manor. Indications of a family's thrift or of social position or its sentiment for long-cherished possessions, can be had by recognizing that what in one household would be thrown out because of damage,□ in another was repaired and treasured, witnessed perfectly in a mended jug□ to which was given a new silver handle, elaborately supported by circular bands, and a chained silver cover, prolonging its useful life.

Some mobile furnishings of a building are often found either on the site, perhaps in a servant's room, an attic or an outbuilding, or, if they were treasured pieces, with members of the family. The contents of a house, dispersed at an auction, sometimes linger in its neighborhood for several generations. The more expendable, the more perishable, the more fashionable, the meaner objects are those most likely to have

disappeared with changing fashions and modern improvements. A consequent truism is that those buildings most easily restored are from families with a tradition of conservatism in living habits, a bit old fashioned in their time, not easily influenced by foibles of the day and, for good measure, meticulous in recording social and business events.

Once the artifacts, whether built in or movable, major or trivial, have been inventoried, gaps will be apparent. It is here that documents of all sorts become useful for although it is beyond expectation that a household should be preserved intact, written and pictorial records usually exist if any legacy of household furnishings devised by will is left at all. For example, the Alexander Papers,[□] in the possession of the New-York Historical Society, reveal through an invoice the traffic in calico and silks in the second quarter of the 18th century. Bills, inventories and correspondence frequently are sources giving indications of missing furnishings.

But documentation comes from diverse and unexpected places. At some point in the progress of the restoration on the spot evidence is exhausted, and sources outside the confines of the site are sought. Surprising they sometimes are. Specific details of the furnishings of a house have been found in gossipy correspondence of visiting friends or relatives. Such reports at times tell of the placement of furniture or of the planting of a garden. Architectural plans and elevations, including plans for a drainage system,[□] for one of colonial America's most important houses, Tryon Palace, built in the late 18th century in North Carolina, came to light after being preserved in the relative seclusion of a private collection for almost two centuries. A tiny drawing[□] by a young lady artist who recorded her holiday in the Catskills with spirited and precise sketches served for the restora-

tion of outbuildings that had later been obliterated by an additional wing to Washington Irving's "Sunnyside."

Such aids are rare, though, and frequently occur by chance. Much more common is a partial indication of kind, color, material or style with not much in addition, and here the real detective work begins. Museums and libraries become the allies of the researcher; his sources of authentication are augmented immeasurably. Styles of window draping may be found not only in books□ contemporary to the desired period, but as decoration on porcelain,□ on textile□ or on wallpaper.□ Specific examples are to be found in a cream pitcher□ and a French wallpaper□ dating from 1860-70. Paint finishes, graining, marbling, the design of window blinds or board valances can be found in books,□ salesmen's sample cards□ and objects themselves. Fragments of ceramics, metal and glass can be identified by comparison with whole objects.□ Catalogues and advertisements, such as the 1830 advertisement of Ball and Price Blind Factory□ with a scene showing the selling of stenciled valances, are a trove of information, as are collections of tools. Design drawings are a good source of help, for they frequently record the fashionable (hence quickly unfashionable) tastes, give a sense of color preference of a period without the distortion of fading (as actual textiles, rugs and wallpapers will do), and often are dated. With its colored engravings of contemporary interior furnishings, *Smith's Cabinet-Makers & Upholsterer's Guide*,□ by George Smith, London 1826, is the perfect example.

Research takes the restorer further and further into areas of choice and herein is the most perilous part of the project. The restoration will breathe, will provide an adequate sense of reality, if such choices are judicious. However, care is necessary that what is preserved is befitting to the site, and

not just a dramatic trick. Most difficult to overcome is a desire to visit upon the restoration today's esthetic concepts, for fashions in "good taste" change continually. One generation finds color combinations of blue, pink, orange and red hues fashionable,□ while another considers only a studied relationship of color acceptable. The fads and fashions of another time are important indicators of direction, and the more transient they have been the closer our contact with the personalities whom they reflect. Curtains and valances of paper,□ such as those found on Long Island and now owned by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, somehow seem to make more specific personal comment than do those composed of more customary cloth. Local factors offer another means of evoking a proper authenticity. The demands of climate and geography sometimes provided peculiarly regional methods of meeting them. So, too, with ethnic or regional usages; they must be considered if for no other reason than the proper atmosphere they contribute.

The Museum has chosen to suggest in its exhibition the kinds of problems involved in the restoration of interior and exterior environments, and research sources for their solutions, in order to acquaint its public with the infinite nature of restoration research and to suggest further research possibilities to those who are already involved in the work of preservation and restoration. The re-creations of sites of the past are increasingly more thorough than at an earlier time and less and less sentimentalized. But each project is such an enormous undertaking that once the exhausting program of architectural restoration is done, the environment, that no less important aspect of restoration, becomes by weight of effort secondary to the architectural problem, and is hurriedly and often insensitively re-created in such a way that

the result is little different from a department store's "period rooms." Restoration has, surely, an obligation to look toward wider horizons.

CHRISTIAN ROHLFING

COOPER UNION MUSEUM

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